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Bay of Pigs Again—Only Worse

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Twenty-five years ago today there occurred the celebrated and deplorable event known to history as the Bay of Pigs. As one who had a seat at the table where the fiasco was planned (and muttered ineffectual doubts along the way), I look with special concern on the revival in April 1986 of the presumptions and illusions of April 1961.

The Bay of Pigs was, as has been remarked, a historical rarity—a perfect failure. The experience was not, however, useless. The education was painful, but the debacle left President Kennedy with abiding and justified skepticism about the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which had approved the invasion plans, and the Central Intelligence Agency, which had drawn them up.

The assumption behind the Bay of Pigs was that the CIA has the capacity and the wisdom to decide the destiny of other nations. The invasion force was a wholly owned subsidiary of the CIA. Its CIA sponsors developed a heavy vested interest in the men they had recruited, nurtured, trained and armed. This vested interest transformed the sponsors from cold-eyed analysts into hot-eyed advocates. In the process they abdicated the intelligence function for which the CIA had originally been set up.

CIA Assurances

So the CIA sponsors assured President Kennedy that the American hand in the expedition could be securely hidden. To emphasize the point, they insisted that invasion planning take place in utmost secrecy. The operation was well known in Guatemala, where the invasion force was training, in Miami, where Cuban exiles flocked, and in Havana, where Cuban intelligence kept Fidel Castro informed; but it was studiously withheld from nearly everyone in the State Department and even in the CIA itself who knew anything about Cuba. By declining to consult the CIA's deputy director for intelligence (who would have disagreed), the sponsors were able to assure the president that Mr. Castro was deeply unpopular in Cuba and that the invasion would provoke uprisings behind the lines and defections from Mr. Castro's militia. The event, it need hardly be said, proved them utterly wrong.

They assured him, too, that the exile leadership would rally Cuban nationalism against a regime that gave its loyalty to Moscow. We soon learned, however, that the CIA instinctively disliked independent-minded nationalists. The agency's operational code preferred compliant Cubans ready to accept agency control to anti-Castro Cubans with ideas of their own about the best way to secure their country's fu-

ture. "The practical effect," I wrote in a memorandum in July 1961, "is to invest our resources in the people least capable of generating broad support within Cuba."

From the start President Kennedy had said that in no circumstances would U.S. troops take part in the invasion. The CIA sponsors nominally accepted this restriction. But it is hard to believe that they really thought the operation could succeed within the limits laid down. They no doubt thought that, if it faltered, the president, having gone so far, would have no choice but to follow the road to the bitter end and send in the Marines. They underestimated President Kennedy's ability to refuse escalation.

The lessons President Kennedy learned from the Bay of Pigs seem to have been largely forgotten in the quarter-century since. Today we are engaged in a slow-motion reenactment of the Bay of Pigs in Central America. Once again the CIA has created an exile force, this time for use against Nicaragua. Once again it has put about the highly doubtful theory that the people of Nicaragua can hardly wait to overthrow a deeply unpopular regime. Once again it has rejected independent anti-Sandinistas like Edgar Chamorro and Eden Pastora, who could appear before their own people as champions of their nation and not as agents of the U.S., conferring its blessing instead on a motley crowd of ex-Somocistas whose future lies in subservience to the agency.

And once again the CIA operation is going to confront the president with the conundrum of escalation. If the contras can't overthrow the regime in Managua, people will say to President Reagan, as they said 25 years ago to President Kennedy, that the U.S., having embarked on the course, cannot afford to abandon the effort, show weakness and accept defeat. They will say that, to preserve the "credibility" of the U.S. before the world, we will have to send in U.S. troops to do what the contras have failed to do. Nor can one rely this time on the president's capacity to refuse escalation.

For President Reagan is setting out on what sounds like a program of world revolution. "We must not break faith," he has said, "with those who are risking their lives on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua, to defy Soviet-supported aggression." America, in the president's view, is morally bound to help "freedom fighters" in the Third World, whether or not vital American interests are involved. It is world revolution on the cheap, however, and at the expense of other people, since the president shows little inclination to invest enough in the way of American men and resources to give the revolution a

chance of success. But, since American meddling in Third World conflicts does not challenge vital Soviet interests, and since the people in Washington believe they have the Soviet Union on the run anyway, they feel they can back "freedom fighters" with relative impunity.

Reagan publicists have elevated this effort into what is now known as the Reagan Doctrine. Americans have had a traditional weakness for Doctrines with a capital D, as if declarations by themselves achieve world-shaking results. "The American habit," Herbert Croly wrote three-quarters of a century ago, "is to proclaim doctrines and policies, without considering either the implications, the machinery necessary to carry them out, or the weight of the resulting responsibilities."

We tried something very like the Reagan Doctrine earlier in the Cold War. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 was limited to the containment of Soviet expansion. It did not contemplate the overthrow of existing communist regimes. Such restraint aroused conservative ire. The Republican platform of 1952 denounced containment as "negative, futile and immoral." John Foster Dulles called for a bold new policy of "liberation." The mere statement by the U.S., Dulles said, "that it wants and expects liberation to occur would change, in an electrifying way, the mood of the captive peoples."

The Eisenhower administration came into office pledged to "roll back" Soviet power. But it did nothing at all in the face of anti-Soviet upheavals in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956, and talk of "liberation" and "rollback" ended for nearly 30 years. The Reagan Doctrine is a revival of Dulles's liberation policy, though one prudently confined thus far to the Third World. But even in the Third World the Reagan Doctrine will require formidable machinery and will entail grave responsibilities.

"In a rebellion, as in a novel," said Alexis de Tocqueville, "the most difficult part to invent is the end." Do the Reaganites ever ask themselves a simple question: What next? What happens if pats on the back and CIA subsidies are not enough to put "freedom fighters" over the top? When we create forces in other lands, exhort them to go into combat, arouse their expectations of our support, do we then wash our hands of them if they cannot make it on their own? Of course we have done that in the past—the Kurds, for example, and the Montagnards; hardly our finest hours. Yet, when our clients flop, do the gospel of credibility and the pledge to keep faith with "freedom fighters" obligate us to send in American boys to finish

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the job? The Reagan Doctrine must inevitably end either in cynicism or crusade.

If it ends in Rambo-like crusading, what happens to the U.S. itself? Will the American people tolerate the commitment of GIs to costly and mysterious Third World wars remote from direct American interests? And what happens to the American Constitution in the process? The idea that the U.S. is the guardian of freedom everywhere on the planet, that it must be forever ready to intervene unilaterally in the affairs of other states and to dispatch armed forces at will to the ends of the world, calls for an unprecedented concentration of authority, secrecy and discretion in the presidency. It is a policy that will devour constitutional limitations and reduce Congress to impotence.

A Warning, Not a Model

The Bay of Pigs should be a warning, not a model. The Reagan Doctrine, if pushed very far, would commit the U.S. to endless foreign exertions, chronic warfare, burgeoning expense and the militarization of American life. If America, as John Quincy Adams presciently said long ago, were to become involved "in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom," then "the fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. . . . She might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit."

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